

FORUM

Monitoring America's Nutritional Bottom Line

U.S. healthcare costs in 2009 reached an estimated \$2.5 trillion, yet America still ranks below several countries in life expectancy and many key indicators of healthy living. “These statistics underscore the vast potential of a healthful diet and lifestyle to prevent chronic diseases before they begin and to reduce healthcare costs,” says Molly Kretsch, Agricultural Research Service Deputy Administrator for Nutrition, Food Safety and Quality.

Monitoring the amount and type of food consumed by the U.S. population is important to researchers who track related health biomarkers and to policymakers who evaluate nutrition policies. One key reason for monitoring what we eat in America is that the National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council of the Surgeon General referenced 68 percent of adults and 20 percent of children aged 6 and under as overweight or obese. Kretsch is a designee appointed to the council by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

“The council’s report cited the ARS national dietary-intake survey as a key data source to track the ability of everyday people to advance their health through improving diet,” says Kretsch. “The mission of the ARS national program for human nutrition is to define the role of food components in optimizing health throughout the life cycle. Our research directly supports

ARS Provides a Wealth of Information

the ‘Healthy Eating’ message of the National Prevention Council.”

ARS survey findings show that although the U.S. food supply is abundant and some segments of the population are overfed, many people still fall short of recommended intakes for key nutrients. To figure out what’s missing in their diets, nutrition scientists must know what nutrients are being consumed by people in different segments of the population—and that requires scientifically proven food-analysis methods. Read about how ARS researchers develop cutting-edge food-analysis methods on page 4.

Other ARS researchers compile validated nutrient data of what’s in foods into an authoritative national nutrient database and keep it current. Policymakers rely on the evidence-based national nutrient database to make recommendations that help Americans know what foods to consume to get all or most of their nutrients from the food supply. Researchers at the ARS Nutrient Data Laboratory are

the conservators of the gold standard of nutrient-profile data compilations worldwide. Read about the many U.S. software makers who download and import this premier nutrient database into nutrition products on page 8.

Public and private sector users also rely on results of the annual ARS national “What We Eat in America” survey of the foods people consume, when and where the foods are consumed, and the amounts consumed. Read about how the modern national dietary-intake survey was developed and how results are used by federal, state, and local policymakers on page 16.

Together, researchers at the ARS Beltsville [Maryland] Human Nutrition Research Center support America’s public nutrition policies and food and nutrition programs. This feature series also highlights the “science behind the plate.” ChooseMyPlate.gov—a free, consumer-friendly, U.S. Department of Agriculture website—was introduced as a reminder for healthy eating and is updated based on the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. (See page 13 for details.)

These ARS researchers provide a wealth of knowledge for monitoring America’s nutritional bottom line.

Rosalie Marion Bliss
Public Affairs Specialist
USDA-ARS Information Staff
Beltsville, Maryland